

Before booking a tour to swim with wild dolphins, you should first consider the well-being of the animals you are there to see. **Ian Wood** explains what you need to know before taking the plunge

TO SWIM OR NOT TO SWIM?

In the south of the Red Sea in Egypt, there is an off-shore reef known locally as Sha'ab Samadai. Horseshoe in shape, it forms a natural lagoon of sand and sea grass where shallow aquamarine water twinkles under the Egyptian sun. I first came here over 20 years ago to dive the outer walls of the reef, but it was the inhabitants of the lagoon that left a permanent imprint on my soul.

During a break between dives, I went for a lazy snorkel and soon heard the unmistakable sounds of clicks and squeaks. Moments later, the first dolphins appeared, swimming towards me at high speed before veering off and streaking away. But then they returned, moving slower this time, spinning around, turning on their sides, exchanging eye contact from barely a metre away. Steadily more arrived, until I was surrounded by scores of spinner dolphins. In total, their inquisition lasted for more than an hour – an inspiring encounter with wild animals on their terms. The latter part of the last sentence is the crucial element: I was the only human there that day and

under these circumstances the choice to interact was purely from the dolphins' side.

Word spread about Sha'ab Samadai, and the developing tourist industry in the 'deep south' of Egypt has since caused considerable problems. In fact, such is the draw of the dolphins who make this reef home that it is now known by another name – dolphin house. At its peak, more than 30 boats visited daily with up to 40 people on each boat. Captains competed with each other to drop their clients nearest to the pod, while hordes of people thrashed through the water, desperate to get a glimpse.

The dolphins at Sha'ab Samadai use this reef as a place to rest during the day, protected from the forces of the open ocean. The sheer volume of visitors had such a negative impact that the dolphin population declined rapidly. Given such examples of the detrimental impact of swimming with wild dolphins, it is perhaps no wonder that the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society (WDCCS) has come out against it in all forms. "Recent well-respected academic studies have clearly demonstrated that swimming with both





Swimming with dolphins in the wild can be an unsettling experience for the animals

Opening spread: swimming with spinner dolphins. Clockwise from left: visitor numbers around spinner dolphins are now closely regulated in Sha'ab Samadai; bottlenose in Kenya; the WDCS is against swimming with wild dolphins in all its forms; a pod of Atlantic-spotted dolphins in Bimini, Bahamas



dolphins and whales in the wild can be a very unsettling experience for the animals,” says Danny Groves of WDCS. “In many instances, several dozen swim-tour boats take it in turns to target a small pod throughout the daylight hours, affording the animals no respite. The constant presence of vessels and swimmers can severely disturb the animals and reduce the time they should be devoting to foraging, feeding their young, socialising or resting.”

NO SAFETY IN NUMBERS

In 2003, all visits to Sha’ab Samadai were suspended while the Nature Conservation Sector of the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency prepared a management plan for this reef. Their solution consists of a number of different elements. First, boat visits are restricted to 10 per day with a limit also set on the number of passengers. A mooring area was established outside of the lagoon, preventing all vessels from entering, and visitor times are restricted to between 10am and 2pm.

Using a line of small buoys, the lagoon has been divided off and snorkellers are forbidden to enter the largest zone. This affords the dolphins a large area where humans aren’t allowed, ensuring that any decision to interact happens on their terms. A fee, leveraged from each visitor, is used by the marine park to fund a vessel and rangers who monitor and enforce these rules.

“The management strategy now in place in Sha’ab Samadai

offers a safe and respectful context to enable interactions between swimmers and dolphins,” says Amanda Stafford of Dolphinswims, Egypt. “All of our guests receive extensive training and preparation before they enter the water to ensure a sensitive and non-intrusive approach. The dolphins have a zone where swimmers are not permitted, giving them a place to rest without disturbance. The dolphins can come to the swimmers’ area when they choose to and leave if there is any invasive behaviour. With proper regulation and preparation, swimming with wild dolphins can offer an inspiring experience, while minimising any negative impact on the dolphins.”

In Europe, one of the key areas offering wild swim programmes is the Azores, where the government has passed a law aimed at protecting the marine life. All operators offering dolphin swims must be registered and are required to observe a set of rules. These include only two swimmers per boat in the water at any one time, with encounters limited to a maximum of 15 minutes. Every vessel is required to have a second skipper onboard who is responsible for observing people in the water. This not only ensures that people don’t chase or harass dolphins but also adds in a safety factor. Due to the perceived smile of a dolphin, there is a common misconception that they are friendly, peaceful animals, but their behaviour can be brutal among rival pods. While attacks on humans are extremely rare, putting snorkellers in open ocean does carry risks for both

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parties. “Unfortunately, most participants in these activities are unaware of the problems surrounding them and the negative impact on the animals involved,” says Groves. “It can be dangerous. Dolphins are wild and unpredictable animals and are often far bigger and more powerful than swimmers may realise. The animals themselves can also be alarmed or stressed when encountering swimmers and can even be placed in harm’s way. Fingernails, jewellery and suntan creams can damage the dolphins’ delicate skin and there is also the risk of disease transmission between humans and dolphins.”

Dolphin Connection, a UK-based tour company that offers trips in the Azores, has gone further than the law of the islands by establishing its own code of best practice. All clients are required to attend a briefing with a marine biologist where they learn about the different species and what to expect from an encounter. A second skipper then takes everyone into the harbour or pool to check their swimming and snorkelling abilities, while instructing people how to use their fins so as to eliminate as much noise as possible. At the beginning of the first trip out to sea, the captain stops the boat in an ➔



area of clear water where everyone receives further training, including how to enter the ocean in a way that causes minimum disturbance. This is a further chance for the second skipper to observe the clients’ snorkelling abilities so that he or she can better judge when and who should enter the water if dolphins are sighted.

Swimming with wild dolphins in places where there are regulations in force certainly offers better protection for marine life than the appalling free-for-all seen in some places. Over the last few years, I’ve visited a number of different locations around the world and witnessed both the best and worst of practices. Take Kizimkazi in southern Zanzibar, for example; the resident pod of bottlenose dolphins living in the waters here have proven a huge draw for the local village, with scores of tourists arriving from Stone Town every day. During high season, it’s not uncommon for several boats to compete with each other to drop their passengers nearest to the pod, causing considerable disturbance to the dolphins in the process.

A QUESTIONABLE PRACTICE

More worrying are captive or semi-captive programmes, where dolphins are kept in swimming pools or cordoned off areas of sea, and people enter the water at a pre-booked time to indulge their desire to meet these iconic mammals. In order to stock these locations, entire pods are often rounded up in the wild to obtain suitable young females, which are then shipped around the world. Some are reported to have died in transit, while others it is believed have been killed for meat. By visiting dolphins in captivity, people are fuelling this demand. There are even concerns surrounding the places that offer ‘dolphin-assisted therapy’ (DAT) – there is no scientific evidence that this ‘therapy’ works.

Of course there is an alternative, which is to stay out of the water altogether and watch the dolphins from the comfort and safety of a boat run by a responsible dolphin watching tour operator. Unlike wild swimming it’s an option positively endorsed by WDCS. “Going on a whale and dolphin watching trip can be a powerful, moving and even life-changing experience,” says Groves. “Whales and dolphins can actually benefit from whale watching – it provides a source of income for life for coastal communities without the animals being hunted or put in danger.”

Groves does add a note of caution, however: “The best trips and operators have respect for the animals and the places in which they live, but not all operators have the best interests of →



Clockwise from top left: dolphin pods are often spotted from a boat; watching these graceful, intelligent animals can be a powerful experience; tourists on a tour in the Azores; the best trips have respect for the animals and the place in which they live; interactions between swimmers and dolphins should be safe and calm



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Dolphin watching hotspots



AZORES

Benefitting from the warm waters of the Gulf Stream, the Azores offer one of the best places in Europe to see a variety of different dolphins and whales. About a quarter of the world’s known species of marine mammals are identified near these islands. Bottlenose, common, Risso’s, Atlantic spotted and striped dolphins are regularly sighted, while sperm and short-finned pilot whales can be seen at any time of year. The chance of seeing other whales, including blue, humpback, minke and false killer, increase in spring and summer.

**BAY OF PLENTY, AND
KAIKOURA, NEW ZEALAND**

On the north east coast of North Island, New Zealand, the Bay of Plenty is aptly

named. Along with regular sightings of bottlenose and common dolphins, there is numerous other wildlife including orcas, pilot whales, little blue penguins and a variety of sea birds. Kaikoura, on the rugged coast of New Zealand’s South Island, is home to resident pods of dusky dolphins. With crescent shaped dorsal fins, this species typically forms small groups of about a dozen members but will also gather in their hundreds for feeding aggregations.

BAJA CALIFORNIA, MEXICO

On the wild Pacific coast of Mexico, Baja California is world renowned for being one of the best places on our planet for encounters with whales and dolphins. Huge pods of boisterous common dolphins frequent these waters, along with Pacific white-sided, bottlenose and orcas. Nine species of whales are also seen here, including humpback, grey, sperm and fin.

OAHU AND KONA, HAWAII

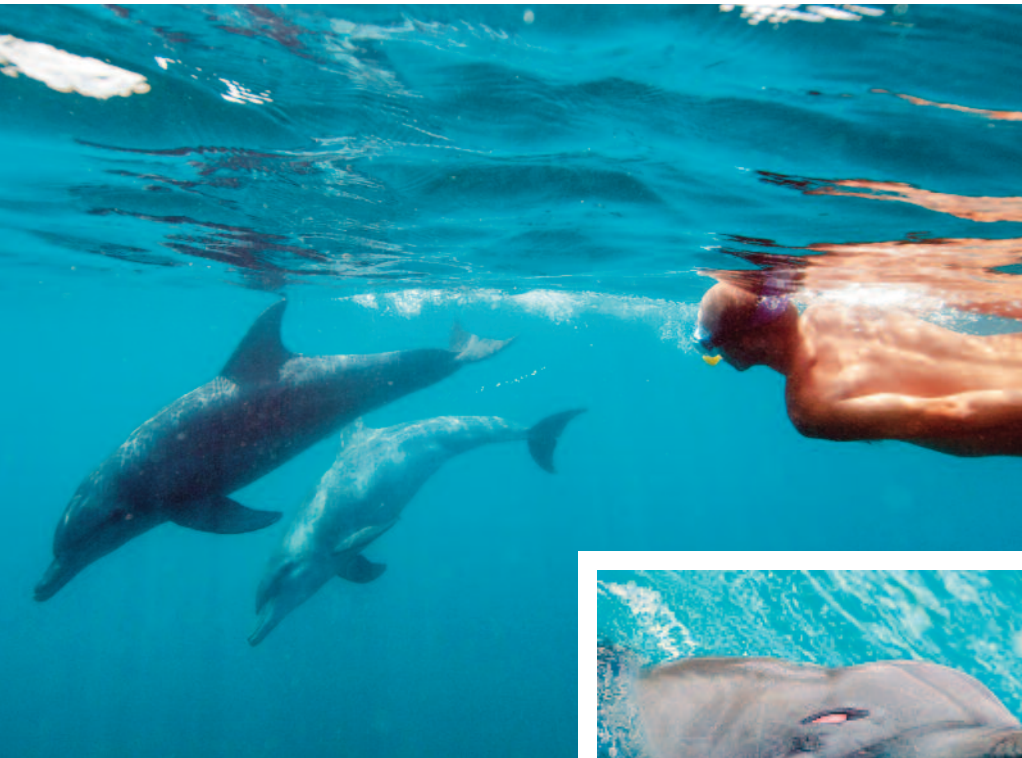
Hawaii’s waters are home to several dolphin species, including Pacific bottlenose, spotted, rough-toothed and spinner. The latter get their name from their spectacular habit of leaping high into the air and spinning several times on their tails before diving back into the ocean. Humpback whales migrate to these warmer waters, usually arriving

towards the end of the year and leaving by early May. The very best months are February and March when whale sightings are virtually guaranteed.

BIMINI, BAHAMAS

A large group of Atlantic spotted dolphins frequent the clear turquoise waters north of Bimini island, in an area known as the Great Bahamas Bank. The Dolphin Communication Project (www.dolphincommunicationproject.org) has studied these dolphins since 1991 to gain a better understanding of the dolphins’ communications, social behaviour and cognitive skills.





the animals in mind and the worst trips can even put whales and dolphins at risk. Areas overcrowded with boats, or where boats create disturbance, can put whales and dolphins under great stress and even cause fatal injury. Boats must always approach with great care and keep a distance.”

If, after weighing up all of the arguments, you still decide to swim with wild dolphins, then ask your operator the following questions to determine their level of awareness:

- What is their expertise in dolphins and conservation?
- How many boats are used in the area at any given time? (More than one can lead to harassment.)
- What is their policy on approaching dolphins? (Vessels shouldn’t cut off their path of travel or follow them.)
- Do they provide training on how to behave both on boats and in water?
- What is their policy if they find dolphins resting or hunting? (Water entry should be denied.)

Any operator should be open and transparent in their responses. If you are not satisfied with any of the answers given, remember that by engaging in this activity you could be endangering the well-being of the very animals that you wish to observe in their natural habitat. **WT**



Above, top: visitors should be taught how to enter and behave in the water to cause minimum disturbance to the animals. Above: dolphins are sometimes cut and injured by boats or items worn by the swimmers

WILD TRAVEL READER OFFER

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DOLPHIN INTELLIGENCE

Can dolphins match humans on the intelligence levels?

Some dolphins have brains significantly larger than our own and recent research has shown that part of their brain – the area we associate with intelligence and emotions – has the same convoluted folds as ours. Tool use is a classic sign of intelligence as it indicates complex problem solving skills and scientists have witnessed this behaviour frequently among dolphins. This includes killing scorpion fish and using their spiny bodies to coax moray eels out of their lairs, and making use of sponges to protect themselves from the barbs of stonefish and sting rays as they forage for food along the reef.

Such intelligence would imply a thought process behind some of the extraordinary interactions between dolphins and humans. In 2007, surfer Todd Endris was attacked three times by a great white shark in Monterey Bay, California, causing serious damage to his leg. As a fellow surfer looked on, six bottlenose dolphins jumped in and out of the water, encircling Todd and using their flippers to beat the water in agitation.

Todd firmly believes that without the dolphins the shark would have killed him. “They’re as smart as humans and I believe they’re capable of empathy,” he says. “Maybe they were trying to protect their young or acting on instinct, but they drove the shark away. If they hadn’t, there’s no doubt in my mind it would have come back.”

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